

Players

For Anthony Molinaro and Howard Levy, success has been achieved by becoming musically vulnerable. Their duo project—combining piano and diatonic harmonica—offers a relatively unique sound to jazz. But for this collaboration to have worked off the bat and grown over the past couple years, Molinaro and Levy have needed to trust each other in a sparse context, in which both their solo skills and direct one-on-one interaction have been fully exposed before audiences around the world.

“You would think that there could be no greater exposure than playing solo, but when you’re playing solo, you can drop the time, do something else with the music, and you only answer to yourself,” says Chicago-based pianist Molinaro, 31. “When you add another person, the rules change. You have all the rules that apply to group play, but it’s just you and someone else. I hope that with Howard it never sounds like we’re missing bass and drums. It’s never meant to sound like it’s supposed to be there.”

“When you’re playing harmonica with one other person, the time has to be there, and Anthony has so much technique and incredible time,” says Evanston, Ill.-based harmonicist Levy, 52. “That makes it easy for me to play. We’re both composers, we both like experimenting with rhythms and we’re eager to rearrange standards. We’re open-minded about playing each other’s tunes. And we both have a lot of chops. It’s inspiring.”

Levy speaks with genuine excitement about his work with Molinaro. He’s the jazz veteran of the two, having revolutionized the diatonic harmonica by learning to play it chromatically and working with the likes of Béla Fleck and the Flecktones and Rabih Abou-Khalil. Molinaro, on the other hand, stands as a newcomer to jazz. A rising star in the classical music world, Molinaro won the Naumberg International Piano Competition in 1997, and in 2001 he released an album of Gershwin interpretations, *New Blue*. For that album’s release show at Pick-Staiger Concert Hall on the Evanston campus of Northwestern University, the hall’s director, Richard Van Kleeck, suggested that Molinaro forego performing solo and collaborate with Levy, who would play the harmonica and piano.

Molinaro had not heard Levy’s music at the time. “It was a huge success,” Molinaro says. “I had no intention of doing anything more than just one concert. But a friend of mine invited us to do a similar thing in



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MOLINARO–LEVY PROJECT: Live Duo Exposure

Syracuse later in the year. It was the same success, so we decided to record.”

The resulting album, *Live* (nineteen-eight), is a collection of rearranged standards (such as “All Blues,” “Summertime” and “Indiana/Donna Lee”) and originals, recorded live at venues such as Chicago’s Green Mill. It shows instrumental virtuosity, free-form improvisation (such as on “Solar”) and a genuine simpatico.

“Keith Jarrett once said that the secret is to make them dance, and I believe that,” says Molinaro, who took the duo to Europe for a tour this past spring. “It’s what makes Bach’s music great. As long as you can make the audience feel the rhythm, you can do a lot of heavy stuff over the top of it, and catch people on a lot of different levels. The dance, the fugue. For instance, ‘19/8’ is a complex piece, but when you get down to the improvisation, it grooves.”

“As we’ve played more gigs, the interaction has gotten looser,” Levy says. “There’s more humor. At the beginning, I was just trying to remember the arrangements. Now, we know that we can depend on each other. It was a real surprise to us

when we first played in Europe. We played Gershwin’s ‘Prelude No. 2,’ which is on the album. We like to start off our shows with it because it really draws the audience in. We got this huge ovation when we played it in Germany. If they liked that that much, what were they going to think when we really started doing our thing? We had no idea that our subtle stuff would get such a reaction.”

Molinaro and Levy are currently working on their own respective projects—for instance, Molinaro is finishing his first piano concerto, and Levy has performance plans for his harmonica concerto and is writing a book. But they are also working on new music for their collaboration and are planning another European tour.

“This is refreshing because the classical thing can be so demanding,” Molinaro says. “One weekend you do a Rachmaninoff concerto, then you come home, practice another concerto, and play another one the next week. It can be so stressful. But this is a perfect situation. It gives Howard the chance to show what he can do on his instrument.”

—Jason Koransky